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THE RIFT OVER IRAQ: MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE?

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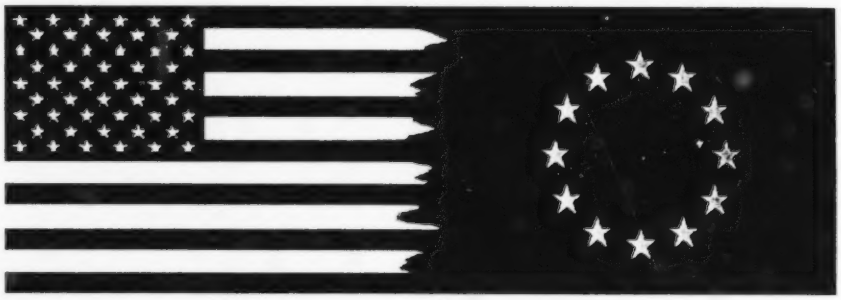

Introduction

The year 2003 has been an event-filled time for the protagonists in the dispute over Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. On 6 February US Secretary of State Colin Powell tried to buttress the case for immediate military action against Saddam Hussein at the United Nations. He showed photographs of decontamination trucks and the concealment of chemical munitions, and played recordings of conversations said to be between Iraqi security officers discussing the concealment of proscribed weapons and associated materials. These 'revelations' were met with a mixture of interest and skepticism as to their accuracy and importance. Hawks seized on them as proof that Saddam remains in material breach of his disarmament obligations. Doves countered that even if the intelligence was accurate, war was not the best way of dealing with a recalcitrant dictator.

By now it should be obvious even to the causal observer that an unseemly pessimism has settled over the debate. Neither the pro- nor anti-war camps are ready to concede anything to the other. Both cling tenaciously to their convictions, emphasizing only those bits of evidence that support their preferred outcomes, and dismissing those which might convinced them otherwise.

It is also clear that there are varying interpretations of what constitutes Iraqi compliance. Advocates of military action point out that successive UN resolutions call for Baghdad to show what it has, and to prove what it no longer has. Proponents of a 'go-slow' approach are disinclined to hold the regime to account for itself, preferring to rely on the inspectors to, in effect, stumble across banned weapons and materials. It is, they maintain, a question of giving them the time to thoroughly scour the country.

Although there appears to be a lingering consensus on goals, the disagreements being played out in the Security Council suggest that more than the means to a political end are being disputed. The discord is symptomatic of a growing chasm between the 'security cultures' of much of Europe and that of the United States - a chasm which preceded the election of President George W. Bush. At stake is the future of the Euro-Atlantic community, and whether a new, diffuse power structure will replace the unipolar system characterized by the strategic supremacy of the United States.

Wherefore the Rift?

Although many observers cite the assertiveness of contemporary US foreign policy as the catalyst for turbulence in the trans-Atlantic relationship, the crisis-management techniques practised by America and leading west European states have been diverging for decades. Robert Kagan of the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace recently argued that the divergence does not originate in national characters, but rather as a result of history and ideology. The 'European' approach is to "generally favour peaceful responses to problems, preferring negotiation, diplomacy, and persuasion to coercion."[1] By contrast, America is viewed (by many Europeans) to find such policy instruments as either ineffective, slow to achieve results, and too constraining on its freedom of action. America, say its detractors, is too quick to militarize a complex security problem and too easily discouraged if diplomatic levers do

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not bring immediate and tangible results.

Kagan is quick to point out that these differences are often oversimplifications and extrapolations of a more complex political reality. Europe does not speak with a unified voice on Iraq. Although France and Germany have all but ruled out taking a hard line, central and east European governments have, adopted the more assertive Anglo-American perspective. This has brought them into conflict with an angry Mr. Chirac, who darkly suggested that France would block their bids to join the EU if they did not echo the Franco-German position, or, failing that, remain silent.[2]

In general, plenty of Europeans agree on the utility, if not the necessity, of wielding 'hard power' assets, while many pragmatic Americans realize that 'soft power' can yield significant gains under the right circumstances.[3] Both Europe and America agree on the need for a multi-dimensional approach to the eradication of terrorism, and that the goal cannot be achieved in short order.

But the question of how (and how quickly) to bring Saddam Hussein's Iraq into compliance has buttressed the notion that American foreign policy is over-reliant on military might to achieve national and international goals, and that it does not take into full account the unintended consequences of war on the political dynamics of the region.

America's alleged reliance on 'hard power' is partly a result of the post-Second World War international order, in which a devastated, bankrupt Europe was obliged to forfeit its great power pretensions, while the United States emerged as the defender of liberal democracy, as well as the financial and military guarantor of European and global stability. The maintenance of that power has been an unchanging goal. At the same time, Europe not only reconciled itself to its own military weakness, but, since the end of the Cold War, has also taken steps to institutionalize it. As Kagan observed:

> Not only were Europeans unwilling to pay to project force beyond Europe. After the Cold War, they would not pay for sufficient force to conduct even minor military actions on the continent without American help. Nor did it seem to matter whether European publics were being asked to spend money to strengthen NATO or an independent European foreign and defence policy.[4]

The significance of this observation is clear: the unwillingness of an economically and politically strong Europe to (re-)acquire one of the trappings of power is as much a rational choice as it is a product of history. The choice reflects an ideological transition in Europe. Mindful of the human and material costs of power-politics through the 19th and 20th centuries, the states of western Europe have, through the European Union, "developed a set of ideals and principles regarding the morality and utility of power different from the ideals and principles of the Americans, who have not shared that experience."[5] As stated above, these principles emphasize the role of international institutions in dispute resolution. They eschew unilateralism and value process over result, hoping that the former will eventually lead to the latter.

By contrast, it was 19th and early 20th century America which once promoted an international order through dialogue and commerce. Militarily weak, the US sought to restrain the actions of European imperial powers through international legal regimes. This was to change after 1945, as Europe and America exchanged places of political prominence, and views of how that prominence should be used to further foreign policy goals.

The resulting asymmetries of power and ideology came to the fore during the Clinton Administration. Strife in the Bosnia and Kosovo exposed European weakness, while America fell back on its preferred policy instrument, cloaking its coercive foreign policy in the guise of 'assertive multilateralism'. The election of George W. Bush saw disagreements deepen as Washington pressed ahead with a ballistic missile defence project, and declined to join Europe in endorsing the Kyoto protocols on climate change and the establishment of the International Criminal Court. The cumulative result can be seen in Kagan's chilling prediction:

> If the strategic chasm between the United States and Europe appears greater than ever today, and grows still wider at a worrying pace, it is because these material and ideological differences reinforce one another. The divisive trend they produce may be impossible to reverse.[6]

Discord Over Iraq

As the diplomatic fox-trot continued in February, France and Germany, the leading members of the diplomacy-first camp, articulated a 'plan' to simultaneously ensure the success of the weapons inspection regime and avert war. Without the prior consultation of major allies or even the Council itself, Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder suggested that increasing the number of inspectors, dispatching UN peacekeepers to monitor their activities and to keep a permanent eye on suspected weapons sites, and increasing the number of surveillance aircraft over Iraq would be sufficient to keep any residual arms programs frozen. Surprisingly, they suggested that Saddam would remain in power but would cede executive power to a UN trusteeship.

The plan - aptly dubbed Operation Mirage - was quickly dismissed by Secretary Powell as a ruse to take the pressure off Saddam. The Secretary pointed out that doubling or tripling the number of inspectors would be a futile gesture so long as Iraq was not voluntarily disclosing the location of banned materials as called for by Resolution 1441. The proposed peacekeeping force had no discernibly useful mandate unless the Iraqi security services were confined to barracks - an unlikely possibility. As the retention of political power is Saddam's chief concern, its transfer to a UN administration would also be unlikely. The suggestion, however, may have been a veiled agreement with the American position that 'regime change' was a goal worth pursuing.

The plan quickly won converts - among them Russian President Vladimir Putin.

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Speaking in Paris, Mr. Putin said that Russia's position was close to those of Germany and France, and called for inspections to continue. The obvious short-comings of the proposal were not examined, suggesting that international opinion was furiously searching for an alternative to military action, and is ready to consider even the most unrealistic plan if it has even the minutest chance of heading off a conflagration.[7]

Thus the international effort is splitting into two distinct axes. One, led by the US and Britain, is 'hard power'-centric and goal-oriented; it places a premium on Iraqi compliance and will, it seems, stop at nothing to ensure it. The other, encompassing part of continental Europe and Russia, is process-oriented, seeking first to curb US power through the UN, with the disarmament of Iraq being of secondary concern.

Discord and the Trans-Atlantic Future

As February wore on, this difference of opinion and approach threatened to claim another casualty. Fearful of the unintended consequences of a war on its southern border, Turkey requested surface to air missile batteries and nuclear, biological and chemical defence equipment from NATO. France and Germany (backed by Belgium) moved quickly to block the fulfilment of the request, marking the first time an ally has been denied assistance allowed under the Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The trio argued that if assistance were rendered it would be an admission of diplomatic failure and that war was inevitable. While the other 16 members of the Alliance, including Canada, bristled at what they thought to be a fallacious argument, a number of commentators wryly noted that France and Germany were quietly readying themselves for battle on other fronts. Germany was shipping Patriot anti-ballistic missiles to Israel, while France ordered the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* to forgo a scheduled re-fit and proceed to the eastern Mediterranean to link up with a US carrier group.

The rift within NATO caused some to forecast the imminent demise of the Alliance. How could an organization founded on the principle of mutual defence survive if a handful of members usurped the right of another to judge for itself when it was under threat? Surely Paris and Berlin were mistaken in treating the transfer of modest stocks of defensive hardware as destabilizing. Clearly, there is more at stake than the two seemingly conflicting approaches to the Iraq crisis. It is a certainty that Messrs. Chirac and Schroeder know that Operation Mirage is, as its namesake suggests, both seductive to the casual observer and without substance. It is also a certainty that the two leaders know that the United States would fulfil Turkey's request on a bi-lateral basis if NATO failed to act. One can attribute their policy stance to a genuine (and laudable) concern about the effects of war on the Middle East and on Europe. A significant portion of European public opinion fears a blow-back from an attack on Iraq by the remnants of al-Qaeda or the disciples of Osama bin Laden living among the unassimilated Muslim populations in their own cities. Many Europeans are also quite comfortable with (and supportive of) the subtle anti-Americanisms uttered by the two leaders.

But there is more. While Germany's unconditional rejection of a military solution - even one authorized by the Security Council - seems inexplicable except when seen through the lens of domestic politics,[8] France's stance shows that the country is returning to its Gaullist roots, subtly injecting discord into the trans-Atlantic relationship, and cloaking its penchant for foreign policy independence within an artificial 'European' position. By creating an unnecessary crisis within NATO, Chirac caused some influential policy-makers in America to question the credibility of NATO and the efficacy of multilateralism.

Within a week, the rift was healed. The Alliance referred that matter to its Defence Planning Committee - a body on which France does not sit. Germany and Belgium dropped their objections, which were in any event symbolic, as The Netherlands had previously pledged to ship Patriot batteries to Ankara. But the significance of the dispute lies in the manner of its resolution - not by any concerted effort to convert President Chirac to the Anglo-American point of view, but by manoeuvring around his objections.

The falling out over Turkey's defence also highlights the perilous state in which the world's premier collective security organizations are now finding themselves. Should, for example, the recent dispute in NATO be replicated in other areas, voices in Washington calling for a series of bilateral military agreements to replace NATO will only get louder. Should the Alliance ultimately wither and die due to American indifference, continental Europe will be obliged to build another security organization to replace it. The European Union's embryonic security and defence identity is currently the only other game in town. As the lead nation within that grouping, France stands to assume a position of prominence it has not enjoyed since Napoleon Bonaparte. Added to this France's seat on the UN Security Council and one perceives the emergence of a near-superpower, ready to either face down the United States or to act unilaterally according to its own interests, as is the case with its non-UN-sanctioned deployment to the Ivory Coast. Such has been the goal of French foreign policy-makers for decades. Thus when short-sighted American officials openly doubt the utility of NATO, they are playing right into France's hands. The subtlety of Mr. Chirac's diplomacy, its efficacy in blunting Anglo-American influence in the Alliance and in the Security Council, would surely make General de Gaulle smile.

The Diplomatic Beat Goes On

On 14 February chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix tabled his second report in which he recounted slow but steady progress on a number of issues, while reiterating his call for clarification on the fate of some of Iraq's chemical and biological weapons. He noted that fewer Iraqi government minders were shadowing his inspection teams, as per UN request. But he also called on Baghdad to either present its exotic weapons for disposal, or, if they did not exist, to present credible evidence to that effect. He thanked the US for the intelligence it had provided, and asked for more. But while he did not dispute the veracity of the wiretaps, he

openly doubted the its interpretation of the aerial photos presented by Powell. With the al-Qaeda connection unproven and the accuracy of US-supplied intelligence in doubt, the a humiliated Bush Administration halted plans to propose a second UN resolution authorizing military action.

The third week of February saw world was breathing slightly easier. Inspectors cited Baghdad's continuing cooperation on matters of process, but also noted its persistent unwillingness to reveal the fate of its stocks of VX nerve gas and anthrax. The inspection team had agreed that Saddam's medium-range al-Samoud missiles were prohibited, and demanded their destruction. The balance of opinion within the Security Council favoured continued vigilance. Vocal street demonstrations in Western cities were raising the bar for recourse to war. Franco-German caution seemed to have the initiative.

But as the month ended, US and British patience with the inspections process was beginning to wear thin. Heartened by a 17 February declaration by the European Union that weapons inspections could not continue indefinitely, British Prime Minister Tony Blair tabled a motion citing Iraq's failure to take the last chance for disarmament offered by Resolution 1441. But in recognition of public uneasiness with the Bush Administration's hard line, and in an attempt to bridge the Euro-Atlantic divide, he pledged to hold off submitting it to the Security Council.

The bridge-building challenge was also taken up by Canada, which proposed a 28 March deadline for Iraqi compliance, with fulfillment of the "serious consequences" pledge if necessary. At the time of writing the idea was being received coolly by Washington, Paris and Berlin, suggesting that Ottawa's admirable attempt to play the role of 'helpful-fixer' might prove to be ineffective in the face of two hardened positions.

Conclusion

Since the passage of Security Council Resolution 1441, dialogue between America and some of the leading states of Europe has been characterized by open disagreement over how to deal with an intransigent Saddam Hussein. The dispute is symptomatic of a larger philosophical one over the ways and means to further international relations. Although opposing viewpoints on the optimum 'threat-of-force/diplomacy mix' have tended to cross national borders, it is clear that an ideological fissure has opened between the US and several allied governments, as well as within European public opinion.

It is unclear, however, whether this will have any tangible effect on America's apparent determination to disarm Iraq. Beneath the expressed desire of pragmatists on both sides of the Atlantic for a peaceful settlement lie two unspoken realizations: that Saddam could still not be trusted, and that process and goal must be made to co-exist somehow. Thus while the go-slow approach advocated by France, Germany and others has its attractions, there is broad (albeit grudging) agreement that pressure on Baghdad will have to be maintained. This task has fallen to Britain and the United States. Although the two allies look isolated in the Security Council, the presence of their military forces on Iraq's doorstep - at the cost of US$1-billion per month - looks to be the real guarantor of the inspections process.

A third realization will not escape the notice of diplomats on both sides of the Atlantic, and within 'old' and 'new' Europe: that the allies entered this crisis with an artificial consensus. The passage of Resolution 1441, with its promise of "serious consequences" for non-compliance, looks increasingly like an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. The support of European public opinion for disarmament has been exposed as rhetorical, while America's flirting with multilateral diplomacy looks to its critics as a fig-leaf for a pre-conceived war plan. Even assuming that the twin goals of disarmament without recourse to war are achieved, the UN, the EU, and NATO will emerge bruised, battered, and internally divided. Even if nary a shot is fired, the list of casualties among multilateral institutions and political leaders will be long.

Notes

[1]Robert Kagan, "Power and Weakness", Policy Review, No. 113, 2002, 2.

[2]"L'Europe, c'est moi", The Economist, February 22-28, 2003, 46.

[3]For a comprehensive definition of 'soft' and 'hard' power, see Joseph Nye, Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

[4]Kagan, 5.

[5]Ibid., 3.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Warren Allmand et al., "War: There is an alternative", Globe and Mail, 15 February, 2003, A27.

[8]"Gerhard Schroeder's last chance", The Economist, February 8-14, 2003, 15-16.

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